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Authentication and library public access computers
A call for discussion

by Nancy Courtney

Authentication is creeping quietly into academic libraries. It is often initiated by groups external to the library, mainly campus computing personnel, database vendors, and serials publishers. Librarians who would rise up to defend library circulation records are, often without protest, allowing a system to be put in place that will track every movement made by a patron on a library computer and match it to the patron's identity. Besides the loss of privacy, there are real concerns of access and convenience. Imagine having to log into a library computer every time you want to check a reference in a database. Imagine being a visitor at a library with which you are not affiliated. Will you have to fill out five minutes worth of paperwork in order to do a two-minute search? Will you even be able to check a reference or will access to the database be denied you altogether? Authentication seems to represent a major shift in library policy, yet the subject is nearly absent in the library literature and remains undiscussed at conferences.

Authentication is considered here within the context of public access computers in academic libraries (i.e., computers located in public areas of the library that are intended for patron use) and is defined as having to log in with a username and password in order to use the computer. In many academic libraries, staff computers already function this way, but public computers have been largely open for anyone to walk up and use. This article is not concerned with the issue of remote authentication, which provides a means for affiliated patrons to use proprietary databases from off-campus Internet addresses, nor is it concerned primarily with the issues of privacy and anonymity, although these are deserving of further scrutiny.[1] Its primary focus is access to academic library resources by patrons unaffiliated with the institution and how the adoption of authentication on public access computers can limit or deny access to library materials.

Authentication practices

As part of a 2001 survey of 814 academic libraries regarding policies toward unaffiliated users, 72 academic libraries indicated that they used authentication, and 56 planned to implement it within the next 12 months.[2] In order to look more closely at the details involved in authentication, an informal survey was developed and e-mailed to a representative of the reference department or alternate at each of these libraries. In some cases, a suitable e-mail address could not be identified easily and the library was not surveyed. Surveys were sent to 62 of the libraries that indicated they were already using authentication and to 35 of the libraries that indicated planning to authenticate. If the library was not planning to use authentication, they were asked not to complete the rest of the survey. Thirty-eight replies were received from libraries now using authentication (30 from the "using" group and 8 from the "planning" group).

Twenty-one of the 38 libraries answered that they had a mix of authenticated and unauthenticated computers in the library. Of these, nine libraries had a certain number of catalog-only machines, two had "kiosk-type" machines, eight had a limited number of "public" machines, one mentioned a single machine for the catalog and one database, and one had a machine just for accessing government documents. Most libraries had a limited number of public machines, ranging in number from two to six, although an exceptional library had 50.

Twenty-seven libraries allowed unaffiliated patrons to use authenticated machines. Two additional libraries said they did not allow use but made very limited exceptions. In 11 libraries, the staff logs the patron on, 8 libraries had generic or guest logins available, 9 assigned guests a temporary identification, and 1 had a single password for consortium users. When questioned about what resources unaffiliated users were not allowed to access, nine libraries indicated productivity software and nine specified databases with licensing restrictions or all subscription databases. Other types of resources unavailable to unaffiliated patrons in a small number of cases were Internet access, free printing, certain special databases, campus network drives, and, in one case, everything but the online catalog.

Why authenticate?

Libraries were asked to indicate the motivation for requiring authentication. Fifteen answered that it was a campus requirement and ten libraries cited high demand for computer use. Hacking, threats, and other security issues were cited in eight cases, and database licensing restrictions were mentioned by five libraries. Other reasons given were the need to limit printing to authorized users, the desire to give affiliated users more access to the network, and the desire to prevent users from viewing pornography.

Most libraries reported that users and library staff were satisfied with the system, although a few mentioned that it was more work for staff to log patrons in and, in one case, staff expressed concern over the loss of user privacy.

Conclusion

The results seem to indicate an ambivalence among academic libraries regarding authentication as evidenced by the fact that more than half of the sample still provide some form of public access, such as a catalog-only machine or a limited number of public workstations, and an even greater percentage allow use of authenticated machines by the public. In addition, the restrictions that existed were sometimes limited to providing an increased benefit for affiliated users (such as use of productivity software or free printing) without denying access to outside users. Of greater concern is the acceptance of database license restrictions as a reason for authentication. Libraries are not obligated to accept licenses that do not permit use by walk-in users.

It is also a concern that libraries are being driven by campus computing policies when it comes to authentication. The comparison with library circulation records is not an idle one. Librarians have taken a strong stand concerning patron privacy with respect to circulation records and have policies to prevent their misuse, even to the extent that systems are designed to prevent retention of information. The difference is that circulation records exist within the library's control and public access computers, now connected to the Internet and tied to the campus computing center, are perceived as being outside the library's control. It is also possible

that librarians with little technical knowledge readily bow to the desires of campus computing professionals when confronted with incidents of hacking, security breaches, and the specter of death threats issuing from the reference room.

The issue is not that authentication is unequivocally good or bad. It is that it is a subject that needs to be considered deliberately, with concern for how it relates to the library's philosophy of service and existing policies.

It should not be dictated by the convenience of other units or the passive acceptance of standard license agreements.

Notes

1. Two articles that do consider the privacy aspects of authentication from somewhat different perspectives are: Lynn Sutton, "Advocacy for Intellectual Freedom in an Academic Library," in Crossing the Divide : Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, March 15-18, 2001, Denver, Colorado, ed. Hugh A. Thompson (Chicago, ACRL: 2001), 54-56 and Virginia Rezmierski and Aline Soules, "Security vs. Anonymity: the Debate over User Authentication and Information Access," EDUCAUSE Review 35 (March-April 2000): 22-30.
2. Nancy Courtney, "Unaffiliated Users' Access to Academic Libraries: A Survey," Journal of Academic Librarianship 29 (January 2003): 3-7.